al-‘Ula – (Map 5, No. 19)

(al-‘Ela, El Olla, Aala, El-‘Ally, Dedan)
Location: 26.35N 37.55W
Al-‘Ula is a small town, located 25 km to the south of Medain Saleh and 45 km north of Abyar Ghannum.

History

In pre-Islamic times the settlement was known as Dedan and large numbers of Dedanite and other pre-Islamic inscriptions have been found in the area (Bosworth 2007; Frenkel, 1996, 180). Recent archaeological surveys of the site have revealed late Byzantine and Umayyad remains, in addition to earlier (Nabatean?) material (Gilmore, al-Hiwah and Resseeni 1982, 10–11, 19, 20).

Tradition states that Muhammad prayed at this place *en route* between Medina and Tabuk. The first mention of the Arabic name of the town is in the work of the 10th century writer, al-Isfahani (al-Jasir 1968, 397), who states that it was called al-‘Awali. Ibrahim b. Shuja provides more information, stating that it was a small town with a *qal‘a* and an *amir* (Bosworth 2007). al-‘Ula is also found in the writings of Abu al-Fida’ (d. 1331) (Abu al-Fida’ 1960, 73; also cited in Musil 1926, 328) which state that it is one of three main stops on the route between Damascus and Mecca (the others are Birka, Zizia and Medina). At approximately the same time, the famous Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battuta (1958, vol. 1, 161–62), passed through al-‘Ula on his first pilgrimage to Mecca. He states that it was a large village, with plentiful water and date palm gardens; he also indicates that it was of considerable importance to the Hajj caravan, which stayed there for four days. During this time the pilgrims were able to wash their clothes, deposit any excess baggage and obtain provisions for the remainder of the journey. Ibn Battuta also states that this was the furthest south that a Christian merchant would be able to travel, as only Muslims were allowed on the route between here and Mecca.

The earliest Ottoman references to al-‘Ula are both connected with attacks on the pilgrimage caravan. In 1521 there was an exceptional occurrence, when the villagers of al-‘Ula are reported to have attacked the Hajj caravan. In response the villagers were punished and fined – Barbir suggests that the villagers may, in fact, have been Bedouin (1980, 175 and appendix IX, 200). In the 1570s, Sulayman the Magnificent commissioned the construction of a fort at this site, presumably in response to earlier disturbances (Bakhit 1982). In 1632 another attack on the Hajj caravan is reported near al-‘Ula, this time by Bedouin armed with muskets. The attackers were repulsed by the use of a cannon, although four pilgrims were killed (al-Hibri 1976, 58; Faroqhi 1994, 67). It is not clear why these attacks occurred at this place, though it is perhaps significant that commercial caravans were often sent from Damascus to al-‘Ula to meet returning pilgrims. For example, in 1567–68, there was an urgent request sent from the commander of the Hajj caravan to send food and camels to al-‘Ula (Faroqhi 1944, 44). Also, in 1672, Evliya Çelebi mentions al-‘Ula in connection with an arrangement whereby, Bedouin in the region of al-‘Ula would provide pilgrims with grain (deposited in the fort?) and in return Bedouin in Muzayrib would receive a payment of grain (Evliya Çelebi, *Seyhatnâmesi* IX, 575, 599; Faroqhi 1994, 43).

The town is also mentioned by other Ottoman travellers, for example, Abd al-Ghani Nablusi (cited in Musil 1926, 330), who stayed there on his way back from Medina in 1694, also, Hajji Khalifa, (*Jihan-numa* (1145 AH) cited in Musil 1926, 329), who visited there some time before 1732 AD. In 1709 the fort was visited by Murtada ibn ‘Alawan, who states that there was a plague of locusts in the area, which meant that the pack mules accompanying the Hajj had to be fed with *ma‘buk* (camel fodder) made of millet, instead of the usual fresh fodder (Murtada b. ‘Ali b. ‘Alawan MS fol. 106b; Haarman 1979, 249). Later on in the 18th century, al-‘Ula is the location of another Bedouin attack – the worst disaster in the history of the Ottoman Hajj. In 1757 a group of Bedouin, led by chief Qa‘dan of the Bani Sakhr, attacked the caravan and killed 20,000 pilgrims (Barbir 1980, 30, 178).

The first detailed description of al-‘Ula, is provided by Mehmed Edib (*Menasik* 80–81; Bianchi 1825, 136; Barbir 1980, 135 n. 69) who visited the town during his pilgrimage of 1779. He states that it is located 9 hours from Medain Saleh, lying between two mountains and with plentiful running water. He also observes that the road between here and Abyar Ghanum passes through an area full of Acacia trees. Amongst the produce of al-‘Ula he lists, grape vines, dates, citrus fruits (oranges, lemons and limes) melons and cucumbers. Edib is also the first traveller to remark on the fort of al-‘Ula, which he indicates was built during the time of Sultan Sulayman [the Magnificent]. The strategic significance of this location is emphasized by the fact that there is a direct, desert route, with 6 stops (including Bosra and Azraq) from here to Damascus. On other occasions, however, al-‘Ula is by-passed when the Hajj caravan takes a direct route from Medain Saleh to Zumurrud, known as Sahel al-Matran (Bianchi 1825, 135).

The first European traveller to mention al-‘Ula, is Burckhardt (1822, appendix III, 659). Although it is unlikely that Burckhardt visited the town himself, he adds the important information that it comprised about 250 houses and states that the inhabitants are of North African origin. Sixty years later (1875–78), al-‘Ula was visited by Charles Doughty whilst staying at the nearby Hajj fort of Medain Saleh. Doughty’s description (1979, 180–91) contains a lot of detail about the social structure of the town, as well as information about its history. One of the most interesting parts is his account of the re-foundation of the town by 40 Berber pilgrims:

> 'Journeying upon the Syrian haj road, with their religious master, from Mecca and Medina, they were pleased with the solitary site, where they found the ruins. The Holy man bade his disciples await him there, whilst he went up to Jerusalem. "How, they answered him, may we endure in this desert place and there is nothing to drink?" Then the saint struck his burdon in the sand, and there welled up a vein of water; it is that luke warm brook which waters their village; also his Jacob's staff put down roots and became a palm tree' (Doughty 1979, 182).

Doughty also made observations about the physical appearance of the town, thus he observed a number of underground water systems (*qanats*), amongst the palm groves, near the entrance to the town (1979, 180; *c.f.* also al-Nasif 1988/1408). The houses were built of stone set in mud mortar, with tamarisk beams used for the ceilings and the roof (Doughty 1979, 184–85). The town had a number of public coffee houses and a mosque (*masjid*), the roof of which served as a platform for the muezzin in the absence of a minaret (Doughty 1979, 182). He also noted that many of the inhabitants had several houses and that most of the people lived on the first floor, because the ground floor rooms were damp (Doughty 1979, 181). It is notable that Doughty makes no mention of a fort, though his chief interest at this point was looking for Nabatean inscriptions.

During the 1980s al-'Ula was investigated by the Saudi Antiquities Department (al-Mughannam, al-Helwa and Mursi 1983, 56), who noted that there was an earlier town lying to the north of the inhabited area (see also, Pierard and Legros 1997, 48, for a view of the old town). The Saudi survey also noted a castle within the ruins of the old town, which included the tomb of Musa ibn Nussair. Sixteen miles south of al-'Ula is the site of al-Mabiyat, which was first excavated in the early 1980s by the Department of Antiquities of Saudi Arabia and which has been identified with the ancient trading town of Wadi al-Qurra (Gilmore, al-Hiwah and Resseeni 1985; Frenkel 1996, 181) and the Medieval settlement of al-Qurhwas ('Abd 'Allahal-Nasif, cited in Bosworth 2007). More recently, in 2006, excavations have been carried out by the Department of Archaeology, King Saud University (Muzhafir 2006). The excavations have recovered ceramic material from the Byzantine and Umayyad periods, up to the 12th century AD (5th century AH). Structures uncovered include houses, as well as a town wall, enclosing an area of 800 m × 800 m. To the north of the early Islamic and Medieval remains, stands a fort known as, Qal'at al Faqeer.

Description

This building, also known as Qal'at al Hafayir, comprises a rectangular courtyard building with four round corner towers. The lower part of the building is made of coursed rubble blocks. The date of this building has yet to be determined pending a detailed structural analysis.

Discussion

It is evident from the historical references and archaeological information that al-'Ula is a town of considerable antiquity, which may have been destroyed and rebuilt several times. One of the more interesting historical references is al-Hanafi's statement, that the town had a *qal'a* as early as the 13th century; it seems likely that this is the ruined building located on the rock outcrop (Jabal Musa bin Nusair) in the middle of the old town of al-'Ula (al-Faqeer 2009, 302–5). The descriptions given by Doughty and Burckhardt indicate that the town was rebuilt, either in the early, or the late, 19th century, by North African settlers. It is possible that this followed the abandonment of the site in the mid-18th century, following the massacre of 20,000 pilgrims by the Bani Sakhr tribe in 1757. The attack took place after two years of drought and was led by the tribal chief, Qa'dan. If this is the case the recovery must have been quite rapid, as Mehmed Edib's description of 1779 indicates a thriving settlement.